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ABSTRACT

This conference presentation interprets the historic-cultural meaning of giftedness-as-potential. In this view, giftedness is seen as a gold mine, and good education results in the mining of the precious golden essence that is buried deep within individual students. The historic roots of this metaphor can be traced back to Plato's plan in "The Republic" in which humans are created in three types: the best are made of gold; the second best made of silver; and the common crowd made of brass and iron. The golden few are provided the best education and groomed for guardianship of the community. Contemporary education continues the Platonic tradition, referring to potential as a "valuable natural resource." This tradition also assumes that giftedness can be defined as an abstract concept and its essential properties known. Hermeneutics, on the other hand, asks questions about conditions under which giftedness might be, or not be, a possibility for all children. This view holds that all those who open themselves to the possibilities of living in the world are already and always on the way to becoming the best they can be. Four horizons of giftedness-as-possibility are discussed: imagination, confusion, questioning, and the fusion of horizons. Education should be concerned with helping all students, who have the potential for excellence rather than with focusing on those identified as "gifted."
(JDD)

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A Paradigm Shift from Giftedness-As-Potential to Giftedness-As-Possibility

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The theme of the fourth annual SAGE conference is nurturing potential. Underlying this theme is the familiar assumption that giftedness is inner potential which must be nurtured if it is to manifest itself as extraordinary talent. Although such familiarity might at first suggest there is no need for further discussion, it is *because* giftedness-as-potential is so familiar that we need to talk further. When something is familiar we pass over it unquestioned, and "nothing is so silent as that which is taken-for-granted or self-evident" (van Manen, 1990, p. 112). Becoming aware of the silence, however, provides the conditions to listen to what the familiar voice has to say and to listen for other voices that speak differently about giftedness in deeply meaningful ways. In this session I interpret the historic-cultural meaning of giftedness-as-potential and take a turn around the hermeneutic circle to giftedness-as-possibility.

The educational gold mine

The gold mine is a long-standing metaphor for education that assumes giftedness-as-potential. According to this metaphor, good education results in the mining of the precious golden essence that is buried deep within individual students. The historical roots of this metaphor grow in the cultural soil of ancient Greece. In *The Republic*, Plato (1952) wrote that humans are created in three types, the best made of gold, the second best made of silver, with the common crowd made of brass and iron. Education proceeds by testing the metal of children. The assay mark determines the education they receive, or do not receive, and the positions they later fill within society. The golden few are provided the best education and groomed for guardianship of the community; the silver children receive a lesser education suitable for soldiers; the base-metal children are educated as laborers.

It is difficult to overestimate Plato's influence on the Western world. Whitehead (in Russell, 1961) asserts that "the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (p. 122). Russell cautions, however, that it is the "fate of all great men" to be praised but not to be understood. Plato's plan provided a categorical model of Special Education that provides differentiated curriculum based on individual differences in potential. Plato assumed that because of qualitative differences in potential, only the golden few could be excellent. Plato used the concept of giftedness-as-potential to advocate elitism and justify inequality in education.

Our contemporary talk about giftedness-as-potential continues the Platonic tradition. Potential is spoken of as a "valuable natural resource." Children with sizable potential are referred to as "cultural capital." Productive students are grouped in a "talent pool". We expect our gifted children to save us from multiple ills. This is the language of exploitation and technologism rather than human education. The assumption of giftedness-as-potential

leads inexorably to defending an elitist system which accepts inequality on the premise that only *some* students have the "right stuff" to be gifted.

The gold mine metaphor turns attention to the essential *properties* of gifted potential. A psychological property is comparable to real estate, it is some "thing" you *own* or *do not own*. "Gifted property" resonates with notions of "landed gentry." Furthermore, it is the individual's duty to develop that property and not to develop one's potential is considered a waste of personal and societal resources. This means that children can be ranked and sorted in terms of productivity based on estimates of potential. This leads to subclasses of giftedness, such as achieving or underachieving giftedness. The resulting alienation and isolation of children that emerges from such efforts, can be traced to Plato's arguments that the human self is made up of inner properties which have the potential for growth and which define one's personal and societal worth. For the past 24 centuries, following in Plato's footsteps, Western culture has distinguished between *what* things are and *that* things exist: the difference between *essentia*, the ontical essence of things; and *existentia*, the ontological existence of things.

We take it for granted that when we want to know about giftedness we ask, "What is it?" *Essentia*, what is essential to a thing, leads to an emphasis on properties—what a thing has. To identify the essence of a "thing," is to abstract what is common to all those "things" in the form of a concept. Moreover, Plato insisted that the truth about some thing is captured in the concept or idea of the thing, rather than in the concrete case. According to Plato, if a thing can be defined in terms of its essential properties as a concept, that is all that needs to be known, or can be known, about that thing. Following Plato, a definition of giftedness is the taken-for-granted starting place for theory and practice in gifted education. Sillitto and Wilde (1983) note that there are two major strategies: definition to process, and definition through process. Although the two strategies differ in their approaches, they are similar by assuming that giftedness can be defined as an abstract concept and its essential properties known. In other words, it is assumed that there is some "thing" or entity called gifted potential. What happens if giftedness-as-potential is one way but not the only way of understanding giftedness? How can we speak about giftedness in ways that do not assume giftedness is potential defined as essential properties?

Educational alchemy

Existentia is the coming into being of something and the wonder of not-yet, the future possibilities that life presents. Hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1989) is a pedagogically "other" voice in education that asks the ontological questions: *Is* giftedness? Under what conditions might giftedness be, or not be, a possibility for all children? The answer to these questions is not a definition, a concept with essential properties. The ontological difference draws us back into the wholeness of lived experience. The gift of life is a gift given to all persons. A gift is a possibility for those who see its possibilities. What this means is that giftedness is part of living in the world and making the most of life's possibilities. Living is the dynamic creative process of becoming more who we are. There is no stable potential to

measure because it is constantly changing. Giftedness-as-possibility turns attention to the coming into existence of giftedness. Moreover, all those who open themselves to the possibilities of living in the world are already and always on the way to becoming the best they can be as gifted physicists, gifted parents, gifted plumbers, gifted philosophers and so on. Here is educational alchemy.

The hermeneutic circle

The hermeneutic circle is a metaphor for the adventure of gifted living. The circle, perhaps the most ancient human symbol, discloses attempts to speak about the most vital quality of life, the dynamic creative striving of being and becoming whole. The meaning of "circle" goes far beyond the familiar Platonic geometric form. Throughout its venerable history, circles suggest plastic life-forms of flowers, snakes, and dragons and are not perfect spheres (Figure 1). In addition, Jung (1967) pointed out that most mandalas, the Tibetan name for sacred circles, are not round but "take the form of a flower, cross, or wheel and show a distinct tendency towards a quaternary structure" (p. 22). Figure 2 is a rectangular mandala with a cross with a recurring number four. Figure 3 represents the union of opposites in the squaring of the circle in alchemy.



Figure 1

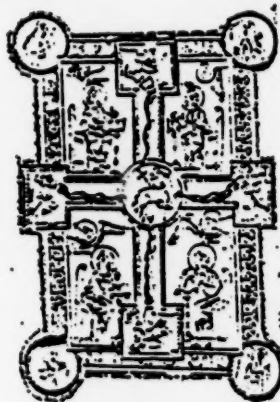


Figure 2

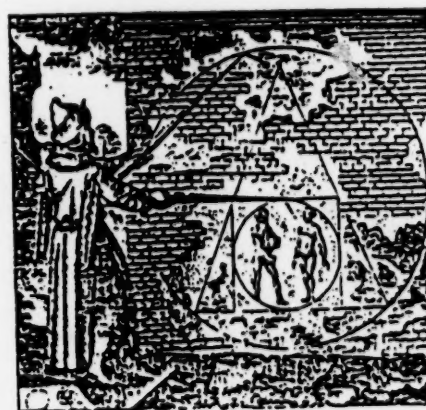


Figure 3

Figure 4 (Sparks, 1993), whose shape was suggested by Escher's (1967) woodcuts, is offered here as an aid to understanding the circular pathway of giftedness-as-possibility. The figure resonates with past historic-cultural attempts to speak about the wholeness of human existence, while guiding us along the complicated twists and turns of a contemporary inquiry into giftedness-as-possibility. The figure appears to have four surfaces and horizons. But if we imagine the figure to be a pathway that can be entered at any point and the surface followed around the figure, it becomes apparent that the figure is not four separate surfaces but one continuous path which leads the traveller around the figure four times. Four horizons of giftedness-as-possibility are discussed next.



Figure 4

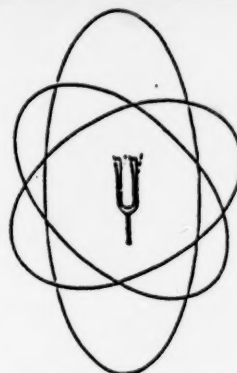


Figure 5

Imagination. Gifted living requires everyone to become "more" than they presently are by constantly striving to live beyond themselves. Imagination is the gift of forecasting the future and becoming at home in what is not-yet. Imagination does not happen in a void but requires students to understand the way in which what they already know, believe, and feel projects the horizon which enables and limits what they are capable of in the future. Possibilities for giftedness are lost when students reject the gift of predicting the future based on the past, and testing in some concrete meaningful way how their forecasts work themselves out in reality. Because imagining involves intentionality, being in the world and reaching beyond oneself, the gift is also lost if imagination is viewed as a solitary introspective activity.

Confusion. When we live at the growing edge, the boundary of the familiar and the strange, there is always the possibility of encountering something new and confusing on the horizon. Confusion is the gift of the "other" voice that speaks differently about a familiar topic. Possibilities for giftedness are lost when students ignore, reject, or abandon what appears confusing in their educational encounters. Some students mistake being confused with being a poor student. Others regard confusions as a technical problem to be corrected, rather than an invitation to explore the ever-new in life.

Question. There are possibilities for giftedness when students know that-they-do-not-know and generate questions to open a conversation to explore their gift of ignorance. Conversation is an art and it is somewhat paradoxical that one must already know something about the answer before one can ask a question that keeps the dialogue going. The back and forth of question and answer is an activity that requires keen attentiveness to the concrete, individual case. Possibilities for giftedness are lost when students regard questioning as a general technique, a methodical exercise that ignores the particularities of the situation.

The Fusion of Horizons. Becoming more who one is, requires losing oneself. In understanding something, we can only begin with ourselves. But in coming to understand something differently, we change. That transformation is a coming into ourselves. The term "fusion" signifies the sympathetic vibrations of student's being in tune with the text and

the topic (Figure 5. In losing oneself in a book, falling in love with science, or being transfixed by math, a student incarnates, makes one's own, the gift of the knowledge, feelings, and inclinations of others. Thus, a fusion of horizons transforms a student—here is educational alchemy. Losing the possibilities for giftedness happens when the curriculum does not come alive for the students and is stored as inert knowledge.

From giftedness-as-potential to giftedness-as-possibility

The gold mine metaphor with its focus on giftedness-as-potential misses the point of genuine gifted education. What the gold mine metaphor misses is the alchemical coming into existence of the gold in the first place. It is therefore with *becoming* gifted rather than with *being* gifted that education must be concerned. Education is fundamentally involved with the person in the making, not with one already made. The current obsession and perseveration with human potential as abstract, stable, inner properties, diverts attention away from the dynamic potentiality-for-becoming-more-who-one-is. Potentialities are dynamic and situated. The actualization of potentialities requires a reaching beyond the individual into the world, rather than a turning inward to mine potential. From a hermeneutic stance, all of us are already and always on the way to becoming gifted. Understanding giftedness as a permanent positive human possibility for *all* students provides the warrant and direction for inclusive education with excellence and equality for all.

Giftedness-as-possibility is a gifted way of living in the world—a way of dwelling in the possibilities which life presents. Giftedness-as-possibility is the adventure, the *advent* or coming of the future, toward which we are constantly on the way. We are all living that adventure. Giftedness-as-possibility reveals positive possibilities for excellence in all students within ordinary student practice. In the mundane everyday events of being a student, something transformational happens. A student understands herself differently, understands the text differently, understanding the topic differently. This is the alchemy of giftedness-as-possibility.

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